

# The Daily Star

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## Address knowledge asymmetry with data

*A three-day conference kicks off in honour of Simeen Mahmud*



Economist Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud addresses the plenary of a three-day “Knowledge, Power and Social Change: Conference Honouring Simeen Mahmud” organised by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development of Brac University at Brac Centre Inn yesterday. On his right are Dr Hossain Zillur, chairperson of BRAC, and Prof Rehman Sobhan, chairman of the Centre for Policy Dialogue. Photo: Star

### Star Business Desk

Experts yesterday called for addressing knowledge asymmetry with data and relevant messages.

Reversibility affects all progress, for which there is no option to take rest and it should be remembered that intent is more important when it comes to bringing about transformations, said Hossain Zillur Rahman, chairperson of Brac.

He was drawing on the legacies of both Brac founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and Simeen Mahmud, head of Gender Studies Cluster and coordinator of the Centre for Gender and Social Transformation at the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) of Brac University.

Simeen, wife of noted economist Wahiduddin Mahmud, passed away on March 18, 2018. She was intensely engaged in working out strategies for women empowerment, he added.

She left a lasting impression, supremely elegant in a simple, loving and caring way, said Rahman, also the chairperson of the Power and Participation Research Centre, a think-tank, about his former colleague at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). He was addressing the plenary of a three-day “Knowledge, Power and Social Change: Conference Honouring Simeen Mahmud” organised by the BIGD at Brac Centre Inn.

There is a logical flow to her work looking at census and demographic data, trajectories of fertility and going on to the next phase of gender and labour markets, said Rehman Sobhan, chairman of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

She was gently modest when pointing out big picture issues and a large number of young people accepted her as their guide, mentor and friend, he said while recalling taking her into employment at the BIDS.

Simeen believed that empowerment resulted from a combination of all variables, said Wahiduddin Mahmud, former adviser to a caretaker government. She pointed out time inconsistent preference, which is a decision-maker’s preferences changing over time, by experimenting with staff who were unable to get out of loan cycles, he said.

Simeen always practiced and promoted getting a feel for ground realities through visits before embarking on any research, he added.

She took ILO definitions seriously to find much higher levels of economic activity for women in agriculture, much of it home-based and market-oriented, a product of microfinance, said long time friend Naila Kabeer, who is a professor of Gender and Development at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

She was free of much of the less attractive features of academics, such as an inflated ego, and she loved her work, brought joy out of it and enjoyed the collaborative nature of it, she said.

Simeen was tolerant of arguments and disagreements, willing to persuade and be persuaded, serious about life but ready to be amused and intellectually curious but empathetically engaged.

Relatively optimistic about the country's future, one thing that bothered her is society honouring and giving status to women working in offices but looking down on poorer women working out in the fields and on the streets, Kabeer said.

Sajeda Amin, senior associate at Population Council; Nazneen Ahmed, senior research fellow at the BIDS; and Imran Matin, BIDG executive director, also spoke at the programme.